

With Jane and Without: An Interview with Donald Hall

By Jeffrey S. Cramer

ANYONE ACQUAINTED WITH THE STORY OF DONALD HALL AND JANE KENYON cannot help but stand in awe of the irony which, if it appeared in fiction, would appall by its tear-jerking manipulation. The reality, as I stand before Jane Kenyon's grave, leaves me saddened and numb.

The lines on their shared stone are from Kenyon's poem, "Afternoon at MacDowell." Although she wrote it with Hall in mind when he, as he has said, was "supposed to die," they now stand in testimony to Kenyon, and look, mistakenly, like words he must have written for her:

I BELIEVE IN THE MIRACLES OF ART BUT WHAT
PRODIGY WILL KEEP YOU SAFE BESIDE ME

Four miles North of the Proctor cemetery on Route 4, just past Eagle Pond Road, in the shadow of Ragged Mountain, is Eagle Pond Farm. There is no sign, no name on the mailbox, but the satellite dish overwhelming the North side yard announces the home of a man who cannot live unconnected to his beloved baseball games.

The living room seems truly a living room, a room lived in, informal. It is surrounded, as would be expected, by books; an open book of pictures of sculpture by Henry Moore lays on the coffee table in front of the couch on which I sit. By the window Hall's chair faces the T.V. and VCR which must have received, recorded and replayed thousands of ballgames. The Glenwood stands nearby. On one wall is a gallery of photographs, some already familiar from *String Too Short To Be Saved*. Beyond are rooms I am curious about but will not see.

This is Hall's ancestral home, but it was Kenyon's "absolute love of this place and desire to live here" which enticed him back, turning it from the place of which he once wrote, "I will not rock on this porch / When I am old," to the place, as he would later write, that held "love and work together." Coming back to Eagle Pond was the second smartest thing he and Kenyon had done, he now admits.

The first smartest thing was getting married. And Jane really brought me here—this is my old family place—but I was

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sensible: I had tenure and I had children in college. Jane said she would lock herself, chain herself rather, into the root cellar rather than go back to the academic world, and I followed her. I really wanted to do what she was suggesting, and we came here, and she absolutely flowered.

She came from a town where her family lived and she had friends. She didn't want to party very much, but there were people around, and she had a job. She came here and she was alone. She had her garden. She had poetry and she began to read it more thoroughly and more seriously and to write it everyday, to work on it every single day. Well, there were times of depression when she couldn't, but mostly she really threw herself into it.

When I came out a few years ago with an *Old & New Poems*, it got a lot of reviews. (I mean, some of my books had *two* reviews.) There was one characteristic sentence in all the reviews that said "Hall had been around for a long time, published for twenty years, but he really started to get good when he and his second wife moved from the academic world to New Hampshire and settled down."

One thing that's tragic about that is that I was forty-seven when we moved here; Jane was forty-seven when she died. She didn't have the chance. She made the most of her years.

For most of us 1969 was the year of Woodstock, Manson, and Chapquiddick, it was the year we lost both Jack Kerouac and Judy Garland, and it was the year Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, but for Donald Hall it would become a year to be remembered for a different reason. He had hit a low point in his life, a "bad patch of mid-life" lasting six years. He had been separated for two years and was now divorced. In the spring, at the University of Michigan, he led a class of more than 100 students in a large lecture hall. Although he didn't know it, Jane Kenyon was among those students, so she got to know him, to observe him, as a poet and teacher, before he was ever aware of her.

Every Autumn I taught a poetry writing class, ten or twelve kids, and I put a notice on my office door saying, "If you would like to be in this class, by August 1st leave me a selection of . . ."—I don't know what I said, five or ten poems. One of the envelopes that year was from Jane Kenyon. It was the first time I remember seeing her name.

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I remember one particular poem in there, which is in *From Room to Room*, and it's in *Otherwise*. It's a poem called "The Needle." Strangely enough there are many things in it that are characteristic of her later work, although she wrote it originally perhaps when she was 19 or 20. In between she wrote a lot of poems, some of which are in *From Room to Room*, and others never got there, which were not characteristic of her later work.

But there was that poem, and there may have been others in that manuscript that I admired a lot, but I don't remember them. I think maybe that poem got her in the class. Thank God.

Hall got to know Kenyon in this class. They would all meet one night a week for a few hours in his living room.

We were very familiar, the whole class. I became one of the class, not a leader. At the beginning I would lead because they didn't know each other and I would establish vocabulary. Later, I had to put up my hand to be allowed to speak. I exaggerate. It was very good. This class met as a workshop without me for two-and-a-half years after the class was over. They were really good. She was by far the best poet out of it, to date—and probably will be, but there are several others who have published and done books.

Last summer I finally went through Jane's papers and notebooks and in one notebook, college notebook, I found: "When I discovered that I lived not three doors from Donald Hall it was like when I learned that Dublin was a Viking stronghold or when I wanted to take the goldfish out of the bowl but found that the water was too cold to sustain life." That had to be at the very beginning of the class, because this was 1969, everybody called me Don, not Donald Hall . . . That amused me to no end.

At this time Hall's interest was not even remotely romantic.

I was in between marriages, shortly after my divorce, two years after my separation, shortly after the actual divorce, and I was petrified of marriage or of committing myself to one person. What I did about that was to have lots of

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girlfriends, a prophylactic promiscuity. I saw different people all the time, daytime or nighttime.

Jane was twenty-two then. She was not particularly attractive. By the time she turned forty she'd become beautiful. It's extraordinary that she went in that direction, but I wasn't originally that attracted to her. I liked her personally. After that class we saw each other when she'd come to office hours with a poem.

I knew she went to live with a guy, her boyfriend, the following June, and then the following October or November I heard from mutual friends that they weren't getting on and that she was going to move out. She had been skeptical about this relationship anyway. He wanted to get married, and moving in was a compromise, but she felt miserable—there is no contradiction there—about the breakup, felt like a failure. I was told she was depressed afterward.

So I called her up, maybe in December of 1970, and said "Come on over and I will cook supper," or "I'll take you out to dinner." She spent the entire time talking about this guy and so I came up with an inventory of disasters of my own and we talked about other people. This went on for awhile. We saw each other about once a week and then I noticed that my other girlfriends were dropping off. They'd move away and I didn't replace them. I had to go out to California that summer and Jane was the last person I saw before I went out and the first person that I saw when I got back.

I began to get worried that this was getting serious. After all, I was 19 years older than Jane and she would be a widow for 25 years, but we kept coming closer and closer together. When we first mentioned marriage we decided the age difference was too great. We dismissed it, but then it came back again, and finally around Christmas or New Year's '71-'72 we decided to get married. We got married in April of '72.

Three years later they moved to Eagle Pond. Their first January was the coldest on record in New Hampshire. With no central heating, no insulation and no storm windows, they relied heavily on the heat generated from the single wood-burning Glenwood in the parlor, with a little heat filtering in from the kitchen beyond. Hall would

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write at the dining room table twenty feet away, feeling the cold, but often both he and Kenyon would be writing or reading in chairs on either side of the woodstove, trying to stay warm.

By the following winter, woodstoves in place in both their studies, as well as new storm windows and insulation, they began to establish the daily routines that would allow them to make a workable life together. It was a house of habit, of pattern. They developed a series of daily routines that set boundaries, and by setting boundaries, created a kind of freedom within.

We lived by routine. I would get up about five or so, a little before Jane, and start the coffee and go get the *Boston Globe*, come back, and I would take a cup of coffee into Jane. I am the type who leaps out of bed and is wide-awake. Jane was a morning person. She liked to get up early. But she was slower, and to have the odor of coffee beside her was bliss for her. And then I would read the paper, have my breakfast and get to work. Again, Jane was a little slower: she would walk the dog up the hill—she would be gone a half an hour—and then she would be ready to get to her study. She got to her study a little later than I did but we both worked in the morning. We never interrupted each other. Once a year we had to knock on each other's door but we were very polite about it. We would have lunch together and take a nap together perhaps, and in summer Jane did a lot of gardening, and I did a lot of working on children's books or other prose for the rest of the day.

Often the two poets did not meet or talk most of the day as they lived parallel lives. During their working hours they lived separately together. "We were very scrupulous in our separateness," Kenyon said.* Hall has called this separateness a "double solitude." In his brief essay, "Life After Jane," Hall writes, "For 20 years we had lived alone together in our big old house, making separate poems in a common enterprise. Our marriage was close, and dread of separation only brought us closer until it seemed that we made a single soul."

*All Jane Kenyon quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from "Two Writers Under the Same Roof—A Conversation with Donald Hall & Jane Kenyon" by Marian Blue (*AWP Chronicle*, May/Summer 1995, Volume 27, Number 6, pp. 1-8).

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We had studies that were as far apart as possible. Mine was on the ground floor in the northwestern corner; hers was the second floor in the southeastern corner. We were in the same house and we wanted to be, but just as far apart as possible. I'm always talking about the double solitude. We were rather reclusive. We got together and had a wonderful time together, but we spent the day in the same house without a great deal of contact. Sometimes we would meet in the morning, coming in the middle from our two studies far apart, and get a cup of coffee. We wouldn't even speak. I would pat her on the butt, and we'd get back to work.

We lived together twenty-three years, and we lived together much of the time simply in the same house.

While in Michigan, Kenyon had not been writing very much, nor had she yet established work habits that would enable her to devote the time her writing required. "Of course I've had to establish and learn to honor my own habits of work," Kenyon said, "My own pace, my own areas of interest and struggles. When we married, he had long since established all of these things for himself. My work habits have evolved over time, just as his had." Hall says:

She wasn't writing so much and, when we were first married, we had the problem of her getting over me having been her teacher. At first when she wrote a poem it was when I was out of the house. I would go off to a poetry reading for a couple of days and I'd come back and she would have a draft. I was obviously inhibiting her and I worried about that. I'm sure that she did, too.

I worried that I'd be a living reproach because I work so much. Her first book came out the year my sixth book came out, and that could be hard to deal with, but Jane was very stubborn. I think that being isolated with me and doing a lot of reading helped her.

Living in isolation at Eagle Pond, sharing the same work, could be a setting for fierce competition and envy. Add in the egos that writers sometimes carry and it could be a case for pure strife.

People say, "Were you competitive?" Well, we weren't in any petty way that bothered us and let us get mad at each other, but I think that we were both stimulated by the pres-

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ence of the other doing work, and there was a point when—well, Jane moved ahead gradually up to a point—and there was a point, I think sometime in the early '80s when she brought me a bunch of poems that just knocked me on my rear, because she made a great move—toward the end of her second book really. I wanted to write poems that were that good. If that's competition, it's great.

You know, nobody was getting mad at anybody, but it happened a few times. On the same day, one of us would get an acceptance from one magazine and the other a rejection, and it just meant that the one who was accepted couldn't be quite so happy as he/she would have been otherwise. But we handled it all right. Nobody quarreled.

One way in which Kenyon was able to keep things in perspective was to be part of a workshop, what she called "The Committee," with two other poets, Joyce Peseroff and Alice Mattison. "My own group of peers," Kenyon said, "has been equally important to my development of skills and nerve." It gave her support different from that she received from Hall, as well as a kind of permission to oppose Hall's opinions.

I saw her get stronger, and with the help of the women's movement, still stronger. The help of working with two other women was very important: Joyce Peseroff and Alice Mattison. I would accompany them or they would workshop here sometimes and I would be very careful to stay away while they worked. A couple of times we all met down at the Lord Jeffrey Inn in Amherst and I stayed out of their room when they were working.

They gave each other courage. They gave each other courage as women, I think, simply the courage to be ambitious, the courage to take on the work. I think they genuinely helped each other that way, derived partly from the feminist movement.

She'd come to them when I had insisted that some word was wrong and she'd say, "Well, Perkins says . . ." and they would overrule me sometimes. It wasn't automatic. These are my friends, too, Joyce and Alice.

Kenyon gave Hall the name "Perkins" after a trip to Maine.

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We happened to be driving in Perkins Cove and there was Perkins Drug Store, and Lawyer Perkins, and so on, and Janie laughed and said "This Perkins must be quite a fellow" and began to call me Perkins. I think behind it is the fact that I was her teacher and I was kind of an institution at the University of Michigan and "Donald Hall" is not the name of your husband; it was the name of a statue in a park somewhere. I think that's where Perkins came from.

A natural-born promoter, a man generous with his time, often helping young writers, Hall found himself in the position of needing to reign in his liberality.

She kept an eye on me. Alice Mattison says that if some editor took her poem, Jane would think it was because that editor had had lunch with me once sixteen years before. She talked with her friends about it, that maybe she should discount this success because somebody was just trying to please Don. It was a real burden for her. Living with a poet who is older than you and has had some success may help you some but you have to doubt the help. In a way it is like being rich: "Do they love me or my money?"

Although they ultimately were to become each other's first readers, in the beginning it was difficult. Perhaps because of their initial relation as teacher-student, it took time for Kenyon to feel comfortable in their relationship as peers. They had begun to workshop in Michigan with Gregory Orr and, as long as a third person was present, they were able to talk about each other's poetry.

Hall, however, was comfortable from the beginning. He recognized in Kenyon someone who was neither deferential nor dishonest.

Well, I never doubted her for a minute, and I felt enormously friendly toward her within the first week or so of knowing her. It was a wonderful class where people were friendly to each other and were frank with each other, but she was particularly funny and sharp all together.

I remember her coming to my office hours one time after the class was over. We were talking about one of her poems, and I suddenly thought of a poem of mine that reminded me of hers. There happened to be a copy of it there. I picked it up and I looked at it and I saw something I could re-

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vise, so I began revising my poem in front of her and then trying it on her, and I never felt—oh, she was aware of the disparity between my years and my experience and hers, of course—but she never felt deferential in any icky way at all. There was something stubborn in her, something that needed to defy authority. I think she was a straight and honest person.

By the time we moved here we could help each other. We didn't do this helping everyday, you know. We both kept things close to ourselves until we'd revised them a lot and we were ready to show them to somebody else, and then virtually always the other was the first reader. That might happen every two or three months. I'd say, "I left two or three things on your footstool," and wait for her response.

Often the asked-for response was greeted with a certain amount of skepticism. As Kenyon said:

I reach the point where I just can't see one more thing to do with a poem. I've poked and poked. Yet I sense that it needs more. Even if I think it is finished, I still want Don to confirm my opinion. We can't either of us finish poems without each other's critical opinion. Once I have Don's ideas, and the ideas of my workshop, then I can complete the work. Finally, of course, I must please myself, taking some suggestions and rejecting others.

Everything in me resists what Don is saying at the moment he's saying it and when I climb the stairs I'm saying, "He's dead wrong, he just doesn't get this." The next day I sit down, look at his suggestions, and think, "Why don't I just type it up that way to see what it looks like?" Sure enough, he's found something.

Hall confirms:

Oh, sure, I did the same thing, and with other people, too. I can never say, "Yes, you're right." Rarely did I see suddenly that something was right. I could sometimes and so could she. Often I'd say, "I'll write that down," or "I'll give it a try," and then discover, in fact, that I wanted it that way. And so, yes, Jane said that she used to mutter going

up the stairs, “Perkins just doesn’t get it,” and then, she said, “I’d go and do everything he said.” Well, I don’t think she went and did everything I said, nor I everything she said. Sometimes when I read her poems aloud I see one word that I remember objecting to.

I wanted confirmation all the time from her, and I was always a little dissatisfied. She could never quite tell me what I wanted to hear. She was very tough and not at all given to any holding back of criticism. One night she was reading the manuscript of a whole book of mine, *The Museum of Clear Ideas*. Now, it’s a book that a lot of people like, and I like, but Jane didn’t like it—and half way through reading it—she had seen parts of it all along, but she was reading right through it, and she was coming almost to the end of it—she was sitting on the sofa over there and I was sitting here and she looked up weeping, and saying, “Perkins, I don’t really like it,” and I wept and said, “That’s all right, that’s all right.”

Jane would be writing and she would think, “Perkins is not going to like this” but, if she decided to go ahead with it, she had made her decision. I think my trick of repeating words close to each other was something I picked up from Yeats who could do it so gorgeously. I was doing it without a brogue. When I did that I knew Jane wasn’t going to like it. Is she going to be right? Would I do better to change? You know the two lines that are on Jane’s tombstone are from her poem “Afternoon at MacDowell”: “I believe in the miracles of art but what / prodigy will keep you safe beside me?” I might have said miracle twice. Jane used a thesaurus and if you look up miracle the first word is prodigy.

It was a natural, if somewhat arrogant, assumption, given their age difference and Hall’s established career, that Kenyon would always remain in the role of apprentice. Kenyon herself said, “Whatever it is that I know about writing poems, I have learned most of it from being with Don, moving to his ancestral farm, keeping my ears open when his peers come to visit. One very important thing I’ve learned from Don is to be ambitious. Just do it, and take the knocks and praise as they come.” Hall has strong feelings about how much he learned from Kenyon.

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I think the most important thing for me was watching the progress of Jane, watching her learn to be a poet by such assiduous work. She read in a way different from me. I was an extensive reader. I wanted to add more books to my life list. There was lots of English literature on which she spent little time. She would spend two years reading nothing but Keats, his poems, his letters, biographies, and learn enormously from Keats. I think I did more intensive reading because of her. But it was her daily work that I admired most, that stubborn struggle that came from inside.

Working with Akhmatova, making her translations of Akhmatova, was to her mind the most important thing in her poetic life. She did not have Russian but she worked with a very intelligent, very literary teacher named Vera Sandomirsky Dunham who would talk about individual words in great length until Jane felt she got to know how Akhmatova made her move. That was intensive reading and study even though it was not her language. I watched all this and it made me want to work harder. It made me want to try harder.

When I was an undergraduate, I remember saying a silly thing to John Ashbery. I was a little younger. I said, "Doesn't it make you mad when a friend of yours writes a good poem?" And John said, sensibly, "No. I just want to write a better one." I don't know that I was particularly trying to write a better poem than Jane, but I was trying to keep up with her. People assumed that she would learn more from me than I would from her, for natural reasons of age, and for chauvinistic reasons. I'm 19 years older. I started young. We used to argue about who helped the other more, each naming the other, but now she can't answer me. I think she led me more than I led her.

The assigning of roles to the two poets based upon gender or age, relegating them to some irrelevant rating system, may have prompted the need to establish structure in their public readings as well as in their private lives. Their first reading together was early in their marriage.

I guess it was not until we'd come to New Hampshire. There were several people who knew Jane's poetry who

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asked us to read together, but then nobody else in the audience knew her. One time someone introduced her as “Joan,” and another time some idiot in an English department asked her if she did not feel dwarfed. She got her feelings hurt. She said to me one day, “Perkins, let’s not read together any more. We are not going to read together anymore.”

Well then, ten years later, when she published two or three books and people were getting to know her, one time we read two days in a row—me one day and her another day—but there was a question period for the two of us in between, and she got three times as many questions as I did. Jane said “Perkins, I think we can read together now.”

When we read aloud together the last five years, we read A-B-A-B. When two poets read together, the first one is always the warm up man, and because I was older and male, unthinking people would sometimes ask me to conclude. We had a rule that we would switch each time, that if I was A one week then I would be B the next week and so on. This setting of rules—this sounds rigid—solved a lot of problems.

In their readings together, Hall and Kenyon provided a study in disparate styles. Kenyon’s readings were low-keyed and understated. With her the poem was all. Hall is exuberant, enjoying the performance, with vocal intonations that carry the listener on waves of melody and cadence, and hand gestures that help visualize the rhythm. His words are only one part of the total achievement.

When I read my favorite poems of hers, I sing them in a way that she would never do, dwelling on the vowels. I can’t really imitate her way of doing it. Her way was much more understated. When I was a kid I didn’t know whether I wanted to be an actor or a poet. My reading style also comes from listening to Dylan Thomas, admiring, requiring a kind of extravagance of performance.

There are poetry readers that I’m very fond of who are low-keyed like Jane. I’m fond of their reading: Galway Kinnell. I know that some people find me too extravagant and that’s all right. That’s the way that I am. I can’t really read like her.

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Sharing the same work created comfort and ease. Kenyon said, “I think it is pleasant not to have to explain what I am doing, or trying to do.” Hall puts it his way:

I think that many people presume that a poet should marry someone not connected with poetry. In my own experience, that didn’t turn out to be true. With Jane, poetry was part of the intimacy. The problem with poets marrying each other is the difficult problem of being in the same contest and one winning and one losing. This would happen with us with magazines occasionally, but because of the age difference, it seldom bothered us and we handled what we had to handle very well. But in love the lovers cannot spend their whole time looking into each other’s eyes. I have written about the doctrine of the third thing. Their eyes join, as it were—in the old notion of vision coming out from the eyes—in the third thing: the baby they have together, which Jane and I didn’t do; the dog that we had together; the Boston Red Sox; the South Danbury Church; and poetry, of course, the biggest thing of all. We didn’t only talk about poetry. We talked about the weather, we talked about whether our feet hurt, but also we could, driving in the car or in the evening at supper, talk about poetry, not our own poetry but other people’s and, of course, well, on occasion each other’s poems. Poetry was an enormous third thing between us.

Although not properly diagnosed until she was 38 years old, depression was a constant in Kenyon’s life. It was something Hall would also suffer from. Bill Moyers had once suggested to Kenyon that perhaps her depression may have been a gift from which her poems grew. Hall suggested a similar idea when he said of the torturous lives of T.S. and Vivienne Eliot, that if we cherish Eliot’s poetry we must be grateful to the marriage and to Vivienne. I asked Hall if he felt now that the poetry ever validated the suffering of an artist or their family.

That’s a question I have been thinking about recently, in fact. I know that many people say “yes” and I would have said “yes” many times, but, a year after Jane died, I became as bipolar as she was. Freud said that this happened 30% of the time in the essay called “Mourning and Melan-

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choly.” From some time in June through some time in August, I had agony and depression that were extreme.

We don’t have the choice, mind you. We all suffer and we must suffer in this life, and a bipolar person does not have a choice except by seeking chemical help. I seek it as she sought it. She got depressed even with her chemical help, and frequently wrote her best poems while she was coming out of depression. The medication never made her into a flat line like the brain dead line on the monitor. She still had her ups and downs, as I do now. I would say that you don’t have a choice in the matter, which invalidates the question—but I’m dodging the question. Therefore my answer is, “I am not sure.”

Hall, thinking aloud, steps into the role of interviewer and asks himself, “Why does bipolarity exist? What is the Darwinian explanation of it, if there need be one?”

Stephen Gould would say there doesn’t have to be a Darwinian explanation for everything. Look at this: if mania includes finding the wheel—was it Archimedes in the tub who sang “Eureka?”—if mathematicians, scientists and poets are manic—then mania benefits not only the poet and the writer and his family, but humanity. Depression typically only affects the poet and the poet’s family. So that would mean that from the point of view of DNA or the generality of society, of the species, there would be a function to bipolarity or at least to the manic part.

Both Robert Lowell and Theodore Roethke were Bipolar-I, which means that in a manic period you do things that get you locked up. There is a trail of destruction among many, many marriages of the poets. I am not at the moment thinking of many who had only one wife: William Stafford, I know. Robert Frost, I’m sure, was faithful to Eleanor as long as she lived. I’m sure if we go back there would be many more examples. In modern times, I would say, probably the percentage of divorce is even greater than it is in the general population—always miserable. Wendell Berry is an exception, a very happy exception. Dick and Charlee Wilbur stayed together.

When Jane was depressed, extremely depressed, in the

absolute pits, I couldn't do anything for her. When she was mildly depressed there were many ways in which I could help. It probably also makes you—there's something to be skeptical about there—it makes you important. But if you can genuinely help, that makes the secondary gain not terribly important.

When Jane went manic, which was rare, she would lose her sensitivity to the feelings of others. That happens when you are hypo-manic or Bipolar-II. When I am manic, I become careless of what I am saying and to whom I am talking. This happened rarely with Jane. For the most part she was tremendously alert, almost over alert, to the feeling—temperature of everybody in the room.

My daughter and her husband used to tease Jane because she would come into a room and say, "Are you all right? Your color doesn't look good." She would be hypochondriacal for the dog and the automobile. She was alert to others, one reason I think she was reclusive. Sometimes people would call on me and she'd go hide in her study or the bedroom. When she was with someone, she related to them so intensely. One phenomenon I've heard again and again after her death: "I only knew her for twenty minutes but I felt as if I knew her forever." Peter Kramer, who wrote *Listening to Prozac*, said that to my editor, Peter Davison. It was exhausting for her and so, if she were mildly depressed, especially, she would avoid company.

I had seven years of Freudian therapy with an analyst. Jane had some time in psychotherapy. Her depression was a chemical event but the intelligence can deal with depression to a degree. The talking cure can provide you ways of looking at things. For instance, I remember that earlier in my life I would be with someone and I'd decide that person was angry with me, grumpy, and I'd think "why?" and I'd get grumpy. I learned the Freudian art of reversing everything. If I thought Jane looked grumpy I would say, "What am I mad about?" Then I would often find it was a letter I had read the night before. It didn't have anything to do with her. The brain can help, with training.

She was often depressed, but she tried not to be.

Out of the maelstrom, poetry is created, and the reader is drawn, enjoyably, toward the sadness.

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We all have depression and sadness. It's about us. Poetry, writing about suffering is beautiful because the language is beautiful. If this is a contradiction, I think energy comes from contradiction.

There's a poem by Thomas Hardy that I say all the time, "During Wind and Rain." If you paraphrase it, it's all depressing. I read it and I am exhilarated. I love it. The dance on my tongue, in my mouth, is so happy.

Now when a poem is a happy poem beautifully done, it's perfectly fine, but there's not much energy. The energy comes from the conflict, I say, between the sensual delight of the body of the poem and the facing of sad reality in the paraphraseable content.

And now, in that true facing of sad reality without Kenyon, how does Hall work?

Something strange has happened to me: I can still write poetry—I work on poetry every day—but I cannot do anything good in prose. I have tried to write prose because I want to, I like to, it helps me to. Nothing is so distracting as writing.

I am lonely now. I miss her terribly, and if I could throw myself into work, well, I would be happier. The happiest time of the day for me is when I am working on poems, but you can't do that all day. I have worked on fiction. I have worked on essays. I have worked on a prose book about Jane and her illness. I wrote that book three times long hand but the prose never started to be prose. I know when the rhythm comes and the syntax works and you flow with it. My prose now is just "blah, blah," sentence after sentence. It's not satisfactory. It's curious—Jane died three-and-a-quarter years ago and I have not, with minor exceptions, been able to write prose since. My day is working on poetry, maybe trying to work on some of the prose, going to sleep to rise and work on poems again.

Writing without Kenyon as his first reader, Hall sometimes finds himself asking, "How would Jane do it?"

I don't think *Without* or subsequent poems resemble her closely. I don't think they are plagiarism, but I do think

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they're a little closer, the later poems—especially the last one in *Without*, “Weeds and Peonies,” and the poetry I have been writing since. After all, *Without* was finished two years ago and I have been working on poetry every day. I'm not about to think about another book for a while. I certainly have enough poems for another book but if I keep them around, they will weed out or get better. I hope.

As I get ready to leave, Hall holds his dog, Gus, by the collar. Gus has a habit of keeping visitors from leaving. Honored, at first that Gus wants me to stay, I then think that maybe he wants everyone to stay.

Driving toward Boston, I play our conversation over and over in my head, thinking of Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon, and the long white house that held love and work together:

We meshed terribly well. She had a bad relationship with her boyfriend, which had broken up badly, and I had come out of a divorce, and we seemed to discover a secret that practically nobody else has ever discovered because it is so difficult to understand, so profound . . .

Here Donald Hall, the actor, takes over. A smile, subtly small, and a spark in his eye, indicate that he is manipulating me, his audience of one, creating a buildup that hits, not like the crescendo expected, but with the power of a whisper:

We found that we could be kind to each other, virtually all the time.

We had a fight every four years and therefore it was dreadful. We seldom got irritated or said anything snappy and we'd try to make the way easy for each other without, I think, the one deferring to the other.

We were determined to be happy in our relationship. We set out to do it, and when things came up that could hurt the relationship, like somebody saying “Don't you feel dwarfed?” which made her a little person compared to me, we avoided that situation—in order to be happy.

We had a good time together. There were certain things, private things that we did: going down to the pond in the summer by ourselves, playing ping-pong in the cellar by ourselves, me reading aloud to her almost every day. I read

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her *The Ambassadors* aloud twice from beginning to end.
There were just so many pleasures.

We decided that it was permitted to be happy.